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SUBJECT: ESTONIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS BEGIN WITH
BOYCOTT

Ref: Tallinn 00756

¶1. (U) As expected, in the first round of voting on August 28-29 in Estonia's presidential elections, Center Party and People's Union MPs did not cast a single ballot, forcing a second round in the Electoral College (composed of MPs and local government representatives). In successive rounds of voting in the Parliament, consensus candidates Ene Ergma, Deputy Speaker of Parliament and Pro Patria MP, received 65 votes (three short of the number needed to win) and Toomas Hendrik Ilves, European MP and Social Democrat received 64.

¶2. (SBU) Leaders from the other four parties immediately condemned the Center Party and People's Union's boycott as making a mockery of Estonia's constitution and democratic processes. Kristen Michal, Reform Party Secretary General, informed us that he believes at least five to eight Center Party MPs would have voted for Ergma if Center Party Chair Edgar Savisaar hadn't forced a party abstention. "Center's disciplined boycott," commented Michal, "reveals a real fear and paranoia among the Center leadership that their MPs lacked enough party loyalty and discipline to vote against Ergma in a secret ballot."

¶3. Local Councils will elect representatives for the next round of voting in the electoral college by September 16. Four parties (Reform, Res Public, Social Democrats and Pro Patria) have stated they will continue to jointly back Ilves, while Center and People's Union will support incumbent Arnold Ruutel. It is also possible that additional candidates may be nominated. Ergma has not ruled out the possibility that she may run in the second round.

¶4. (SBU) Center Party and People's Union are aggressively seeking support among local government officials. Randel Lants, the Social Democrats Secretary General, acidly described their behavior as

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"buying and bribing" votes by "pandering to pensioners and rural communities." While Center Party and People's Union have repeatedly claimed that they already have enough votes to re-elect Ruutel, Lants said that there are enough undecided votes in play to make for a close election.

GOLDSTEIN